A Unique Representation of Ganga-Yamuna in The Art of Mithila

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Ganga and Yamuna, the two most important rivers of India also found favour with the ancient Indian artists and were represented not only by the artists of the North India but also by those of the South India. These rivers were not taken as goddesses in the time of the *Rg Veda* but were the recipient of a prayer from the Rshis. But in the time of the epics and *Puranas*, they were accorded the status of the goddesses. By that time, Ganga had become the Great Mother Goddess, Yamuna was also accorded status of a goddess. But she could not acquire the status of Ganga. Ganga was undoubtedly more popular and sacred river of the two. That she was worshipped by the people even in the Buddha's time, is evident from the *Jataka* stories. The Hindus believe that mere utterance of the word 'Ganga' will purify them.

The account of Ganga's origin is quite interesting. The Ramayana[3] and Mahabharata[4], the two most important epics of the Hindus, give an almost identical account of her origin. According to them, Ganga was the eldest daughter of Himavana and she was brought down from heaven by the austerity of Bhagiratha. For saving the people from the fury of Ganga and from the terrible force with which she might descend on earth, Shiva took her safely into his *jatamakuta*. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta (Line-31) gives a similar description, i.e. "Ganga flowing quickly on being liberated from confinement in the thickets of matted hairs of (the God) Pashupati[6] ..." It is due to this, that Shiva is also called Gangadhara. Ganga is also called Jahnavi because soon after Shiva released her from his hairs, Saint Jahnu gulped her in a sip and subsequently on the request of Bhagiratha allowed her to go out of his ear. She has yet another name i.e. Urvashi,

because she sat on the *uru* (thigh) of Bhagiratha. In the Gupta inscription also, she has been referred to as Bhagirathi[8], Jahnavi[9] and Mandakini.[10]

According to another version, the source of Ganga, the celestial stream which washes away the sin, where only nymphs of the heaven sported, resided in the left toes of Vishnu. According to the Vishnu Purana 'falling from as high as she issued from the moon, she alights on the summit of Meru and thence flows to the four quarters of the earth, for its purification. The Sita, Alakananda, Chakshu and Bhadra are four branches but one river divided according to the direction towards which it proceeds. The branch that is known as Alakananda was borne affectionately by Mahadeva, upon his head, for more than a hundred years.

Sons of Sagara were raised to the heaven by the river as she washed their ashes[12]. Like Sarasvati, Ganga[14] is also described as issuing from the water-jug or *kamandalu* of Brahma.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* throw further light on the conception of this goddess. According to the *Mahabharata*, Ganga is the mother of Bhishma (in human form by becoming the wife of king Shantanu)[15] and therefore, he is called Gangeya. She is also referred to as a wife of Shiva along with Uma and also the 'wife of ocean'.[16] Again, she is also taken as the mother of Kartikeya[17]. According to a legend, at one time, the gods were powerless against the demon Taraka, who could be destroyed only by a child of Shiva without aid of a woman. According to their pleas, Shiva finally revealed his seed first to Agni. But even the god of fire could not carry it and cast it into the Ganga. From this union sprang Kartikeya. In fact, Ganga is the most vividly personified of all the rivers[18].

The Yamuna, another river goddess, has its religious significance too. The *Markandeya Purana* gives an interesting account of her origion.[19] According to this Purana, Yamuna is the daughter of Sajna (who was the daughter of Vishvakarma) from the Sun, who cursed her that she would give birth to a fickle river, since she was shy and trembling in meeting him. Sanjna has been mentioned as Surenu, Rajni, Dhau, Tvastri, Prabha and Prajna also in various *Puranas*. Yamuna has two brothers namely Yama and Manu from her own mother and had few other step-brothers also. The festival Yama-dvitiya or Bhai-duja in the month of Kartika is celebrated in the memory of Yama's visit to her sister Yamuna's house.

The Yamuna is revered by the Hindus also due to her association with Lord

Krshna. It is on the bank of the Yamuna that Krshna spent his childhood and performed his *rasa-lila*.

Not only this, various authors have put Yamuna at par with Ganga in the life of Lord Shiva[20].

As far as the iconography is concerned, according to the *Agni Purana*, Jahnavi (Ganga) should be standing on a makara, holding lotus and *ghata* and Yamuna seated on a tortoise carryng a *ghata*[21]. The *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana* states that the Yamuna and the Bhagirathi should be shown on *kurma* (tortoise) and *makara* respectively. A lotus and a blue lotus should be shown in the hands of Ganga and Yamuna respectively[22].

We have two representations of Ganga and Yamuna from Mithila region. The images of Ganga and Yamuna are depicted on the door-jambs of the ruined temple of Surya at Kamaladitya Sthana, Andhara Tharhi, district Madhubani[23]. The carving of these river goddesses is quite beautiful. The moulding of the feminine beauty in the bodies is sensitive as well as sensual. On both the faces, seductive smile can be seen, which is characteristic of the art of Mithila in the later periods. Here the figure of Yamuna is shown standing on a *kurma* within trefoiled arch. The figure of Dandi is adjacent to it, where as the figure of Ganga is being attended by two figures, a *chauri*-bearer and Pingala with beard.

We have another Ganga - Yamuna representations of this very style from a Vishnu temple built by king Nanya Deva's minister Shridhara in circa 10th - 11th century A.D.[24]

Representation of Danda and Pingala, who are connected with Lord Surya, with Ganga and Yamuna in the art of Mithila, makes these representations unique. Most probably, the artist of this region wanted to show Yamuna's relationship with Surya and therefore, Danda and Pingala, who were originally attendants of Lord Surya, are represented with his daughter Yamuna. However, some persons identify Danda figure as that of Yama. As we know, Yama is brother of Yamuna and one of the sons of the Sun god[25]. And then Yamuna herself has been called Pingala in certain texts.[26] Thus we see that both Danda and Pingala are associated with Yamuna.

However, according to another view, the person who is identified as Dandi is Skanda or Kartikeya himself and the person who is identified as Pingala is Agni,

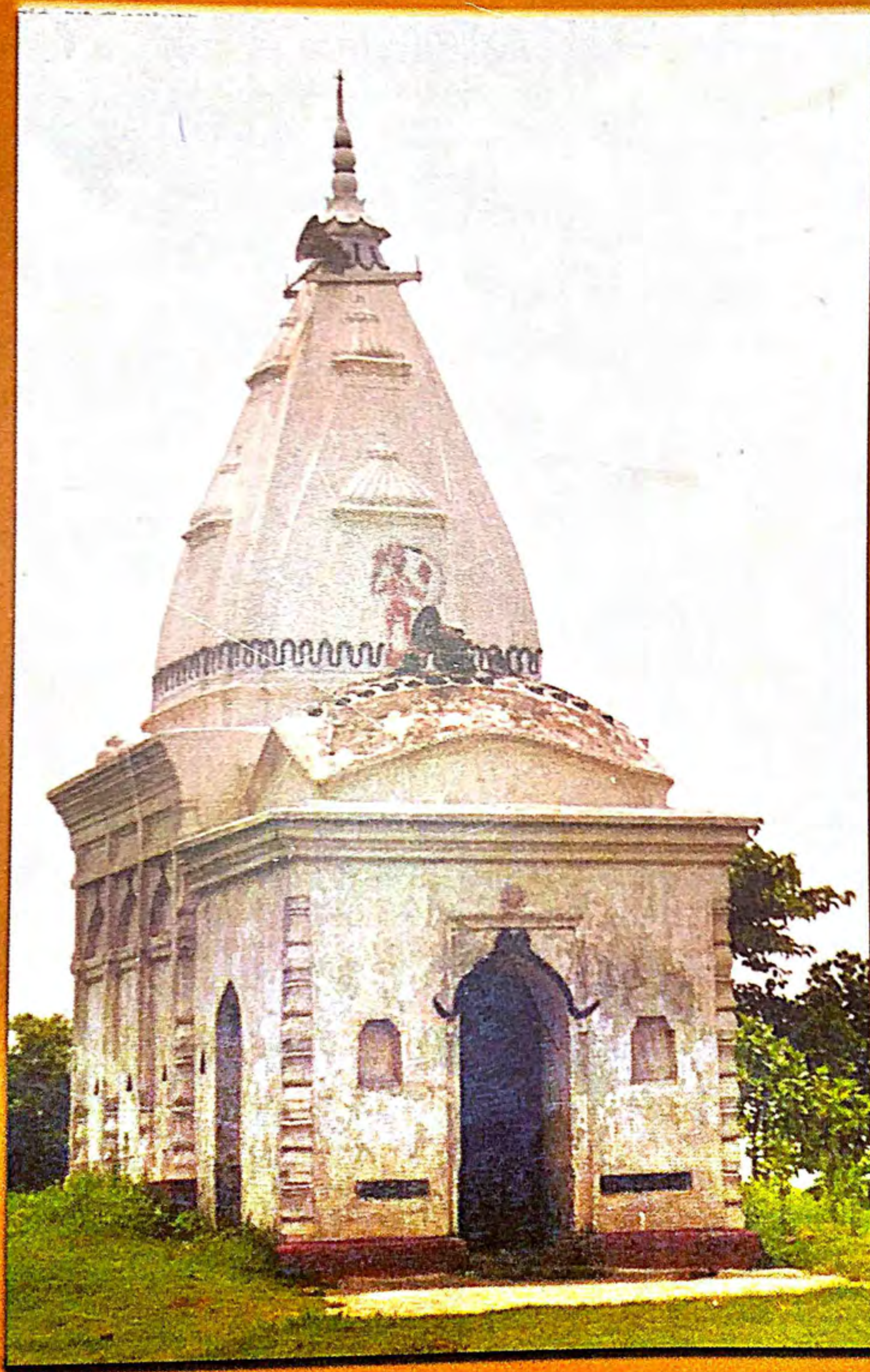
engaged in recording the good and the evil deeds of people and called Pingala because of his tawny colour[27]. If we identify these figures with Skanda and Agni, they may have been represented here due to their relationship with Ganga[28].

Whatever may be their identification, we have no image of these river-goddesses with these associated figures from any part of India. And these figures make this Ganga-Yamuna representation unique.

Reference

1. *RV* X. 75.5.
2. *Jataka*, Cambridge Translation, II, P. 179.
3. *Ramayana*, I, 36, 44.
4. *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, 88, 20.
5. She is, therefore, called Bhagirathi also.
6. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, P. 16.
7. *Mahabharata*. 7.60.6; cf. Rey. Ramkumar, *Mahabharata*.
8. Fleet, *op. cit.*, II, Vol. III, PP. 241, 248.
10. *Ibid*, p. 184.
11. Wilson, *The Visnu Purana*, p. 228, cf. *Visnu Purana*, 4.4.15.
12. *Ibid*, p. 229.
13. *Skanda Purana* VII. 1.35.25.26.
14. "The divine sin-dissolving Bhagirathi, flowing on the earth, was in the beginning, water in the vessel of the primieval Grand Father (Brahma)". See Shankaracharya, Gangashtakam, in A. Avalon and E. Avalon (trans.) *Hymns to the Goddess*, (Madras, 1661), p. 41.
15. *Mahabharata*, 1.98.5.
16. Hopking, *Epic Mythology*, p. 5.
17. *Mahabharata*, Salya Parva, 44.
18. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
19. *Markandeya Purana*, Ch. LXXVII. 1-7.
20. Ratnakara, *Haravijaya* 1.39; *Sankara-Sivapadadika-Santa Varnana Stotra*. 32.
21. *Agni Purana*, 50, 17.
22. *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, III, 52, 19-20.
23. Vijayakanta Mishra, *Mithila: Art And Architecture*, Allahabad, 1978, p. 34.
24. *Ibid*, p. 38, Pl. XV, Fig. 28 & 29.
25. N.K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahamacal Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929. p. 164.
26. *Hathapradipika* (a yogic text of 14th to 16th Cent. A.D.) III. 106.
27. N.K. Bhattasali, *op. cit.*
28. Steven G. Darian, *The Ganges in Myth and History*, Hawaii, Honolulu, 1978. p. 33-34.

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